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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 GUANGZHOU 000544

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SUBJECT: Fujian's Minorities: Hard To Distinguish But Still  
Collecting Benefits

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1. (U) Summary. Fujian's two largest ethnic minorities-the She and the Hui-are already visually indistinguishable from their Han neighbors and appear to have lost or are rapidly losing culturally distinctive characteristics. This is especially the case with the urban She and the Hui minority members living near Quanzhou. Still the She and the Hui have no qualms about accepting affirmative action-type benefits extended to minorities. Under the confusing definition of what constitutes an ethnic minority in China, the Hakka of southern Fujian are not considered a minority. They are classified as a subgroup of the Han majority. Nonetheless, the Hakka retain a distinctive language, a proud heritage linked with unusual architecture, and a deeply entrenched consciousness of being "different." End summary.

2. (U) During several visits to Fujian in August and September, TD Off met with representatives of and experts on the She and Hui minority groups and the Hakka people of southern Fujian. The She(or Sanhak, as they refer to themselves) represent Fujian's largest ethnic minority group. The 375,000 She living in Fujian constitute approximately 53% of China's total She population. The approximately 100,000 Hui descendants of Arabic and Persian traders who followed the maritime Silk Road and settled near Quanzhou during the fifteenth century constitute the second largest ethnic minority in Fujian. Populations of other ethnic minority groups in Fujian are comparatively small, although 53 out of China's 55 ethnic minority groups are represented in Fujian.

Impossible to Distinguish  
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3. (U) Fujian's She and Hui ethnic minority members do not wear any distinctive costumes or clothing. Without distinguishing physical characteristics, the She and Hui people are virtually impossible to distinguish from their Han neighbors. Many of Fujian's She people still reside in rural villages scattered in mountainous areas near Ningde and Fuzhou. For economic reasons more than ethnicity (because the She farmers remain relatively impoverished), Han neighbors have viewed the She as undesirable marriage partners. She people living in urban areas, however, like the Hui, have intermarried with the dominant Han to the extent that they have almost completely been assimilated by the dominant culture. Demonstrating the degree of intermarriage among the Hui and Han, three Hui interlocutors in one Hui village told us that their

spouses are Han.

14. (U) While the rural She still maintain distinctive traditions including story-telling songs and a unique form of martial arts, these traditions have been lost among the urban She. According to one She minority representative, only a dwindling number of elderly, urban She maintain beliefs in traditional She "superstitions." In actuality, only the family names that are traditionally associated with the She people serve to perpetuate a diminishing sense of separate identity. Hui minority representatives told us that although the Hui people still claim and assert the right to a Muslim-style in-ground burial (a privilege not afforded others), almost all of Fujian's Hui do not observe other Islamic traditions relating to food and religious practice, nor are they schooled in Arabic. Many of Fujian's Hui have adopted Buddhist, Taoist, or Christian religious beliefs. Most eat pork. According to one Hui elder, when one Hui delegate went to Beijing to attend the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference, the delegate was distressed to find that because of his Hui heritage, he had been assigned to the Halal cafeteria. Linguistically, most of Quanzhou's Hui residents speak the Minnan language of southern Fujian. Their identity is linked with Minnan culture, not Islamic culture.

15. (SBU) Academics from Xiamen University told TD Off that beginning in the late 1990s, a few individuals within the Hui community began "re-identifying" with their Muslim roots. The scholars speculated that this likely had more to do with pursuing business opportunities with the Muslim world than with a desire to reconnect with religious roots. When asked if Fujian's Hui community maintained any special links with other Muslim communities within China or abroad, Hui villagers provided TD Off with a tour of their local cemetery. Within the cemetery were approximately one dozen gravesites, most with tombstones inscribed in Arabic, of Muslims from other parts of China and the world who had passed away

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in Xiamen. The same villagers recalled that six or seven years ago, a wealthy businessman from some Arabic-speaking country visited their village and donated tables and chairs to Hui residents of the village. When asked if they had followed reports of ethnic unrest in Urumqi, the Hui of Chen Tang village said they were not aware as they rarely watched the news. They, as did Hui villagers of Bai Qi near Quanzhou, indicated they felt no special affinity for or connection with other Muslim ethnic groups in China or elsewhere.

Affirmative action - Chinese style

16. (U) Like other minority groups in China, the She and Hui people are exempted from the one-child policy; they are allowed to have two children. She and Hui villagers noted there were other privileges that were extended to them based on their minority group status. These include 10 bonus or preferential points on the national College Entrance Exam or 20 bonus or preferential points when applying to Fujian-based educational institutions. Minority residents are also entitled to a 600 RMB/year educational allowance for children. When asked if there were any downsides to their minority status (i.e., discrimination), She and Hui representatives said they thought at present the positives outweighed the negatives.

Not a minority, but definitely different - the Hakka

17. (U) Considered to be a sub-group within the Han majority, the Hakka of southern Fujian began arriving in the area more than 1,000 years ago when war and turmoil drove them from their homes in Central China. As newcomers, the Hakka clustered in mountainous areas in Fujian, Guangdong, Jiangxi and Anhui provinces where they developed a unique style of architecture-massive, multi-story earthen round (and square) houses. Originally built as easily secured fortresses that could be shuttered to protect from natural and human threats, the distinctive structures also served to foster a strong sense of clan and family identity. The Hakka have thrived in southern Fujian. Tightly-knit and keenly aware of their distinct heritage, the Hakka have become a powerful economic and social force

in the areas which they inhabit. Hakka communities, said several of our Hakka interlocutors, have grown stronger and increasingly Hakka-as the economically prosperous Hakka have bought out many of their non-Hakka neighbors.

18. (U) The Hakka have special words-mostly derogatory-to describe their non-Hakka neighbors. The Hakka language serves to heighten a sense of distinct cultural identity. Unlike the Hui, the Hakka do not generally speak the Minnan language, and they do not identify themselves as Minnan people. Although most of our Hakka interlocutors said that Hakka were free to intermarry with non-Hakka people, other observers have noted that matriarchal tradition within Hakka culture often places pressure on females to marry within the group.

19. (SBU) Comment. Ethnicity can be a confusing concept, and it certainly is in China where even the Han majority is descended from a gene pool that includes a variety of nomadic groups. It is confusing concept in Fujian, too, where the largest recognized minority groups have been largely assimilated by the Han but where another group, the Hakka that prides itself in being different is considered to be a part of the Han majority. Because Fujian's minorities look "Han," it seems remarkable that there is presently so little resentment among the Han about the special privileges that are extended to these virtually indistinguishable minorities. End comment.

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